On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers

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As ever-increasing numbers of nonnative speakers of English enroll in 1st-year writing classes in colleges and universities in North America, questions about how to deal with these students have become more frequent, important, and urgent. In an attempt to address some of these questions, researchers who focus on L2 writing have generated a fairly large body of scholarship and commentary on a great number of relevant theoretical and practical issues. However, I believe that one area that needs further exploration is the matter of the ethics (that is, a system or code of conduct) employed in the treatment of ESL writers. Therefore, I would like to present my thinking on this issue, which is based on the notion of respect, for it is my belief that an instructional program that does not respect its students is primed for failure and almost certain to engender resentment. In this article, I draw on my understanding of the existing L2 writing research as well as my own experience in teaching ESL writers and administering ESL writing programs. My aim is not to preach or to attempt to reveal any transcendent truths but to provoke thought and discussion.1

In my view, there are four basic ways in which ESL writers need to be respected: they need to be (a) understood, (b) placed in suitable learning contexts, (c) provided with appropriate instruction, and (d) evaluated fairly.

UNDERSTAND ESL WRITERS

First, those who would deal with ESL writers need to recognize that these writers may be very different from their native English-speaking (NES) peers in important ways. ESL writers come, of course, from many different cultures, rhetorical traditions, and linguistic backgrounds and may bring with them distinct strategies for learning and writing.

The results of the relevant research suggest that, in general, ESL writing is distinct from and often simpler and less effective (in the eyes of NES judges) than that of their NES peers. ESL writers’ composing processes seem constrained in some salient ways. Because they are not writing in their native language, they may plan less, write with more difficulty owing to a lack of lexical resources, reread what they write less,
and exhibit less ability to revise in an intuitive manner—on the basis of what “sounds” right.

At the discourse level, ESL writers’ texts often do not meet the expectations of NES readers. Their texts frequently exhibit distinct patterns of exposition, argumentation, and narration; their orientation of readers has been deemed by some to be less appropriate and acceptable, and they sometimes manifest a distinct pattern and less facility in their use of certain cohesive devices.

In terms of lower level linguistic concerns, ESL writers’ texts typically exhibit a style of writing that is simpler than that of NES writers. ESL writers’ sentences often include more coordination, less subordination, less noun modification, and fewer passives. As language learners, ESL writers usually use shorter words and less specific words and generally manifest less lexical variety and sophistication. (See Silva, in press, for a fuller account of this research and its findings.)

It is important to note that ESL writers may also be very different from one another; that is, ESL writers comprise a very heterogeneous population. For example, there are international students (in a country to study and then return home), immigrants (in a country to stay), and resident bilinguals (who were in a country all the time). Recognizing these differences and understanding their nature and implications for writing instruction is, in my view, the basis for the ethical treatment of ESL writers.

**PROVIDE SUITABLE LEARNING CONTEXTS**

Second, those who would deal with ESL writers need to recognize that these differences may call for special instructional contexts. First, I believe it is necessary to offer ESL writers as many placement options as possible. According to their abilities and preferences, they should be given the choice of enrolling in mainstream composition classes, basic writing classes, sheltered ESL classes, or classes designed to accommodate both native and nonnative speakers of English. (See Silva, 1994, for a further discussion of placement issues.) Regardless of which placement option is chosen, it is crucial for teachers to be knowledgeable about and have experience in working with ESL writers. (An open mind, a tolerance of difference, and an interest in other cultures is necessary but by no means sufficient here.) It is likewise essential to consider that curricula, materials, and practices that are successful with NES writers may not necessarily be successful with their ESL peers, that the unreflective adoption of mainstream composition materials may seriously disadvantage ESL writers by assuming knowledge that they do not possess (Who is your favorite character on television and why?) or expecting a familiarity or proficiency with rhetorical notions (reader-based writing,
directness), linguistic notions (syntactic and lexical variety), conventional notions (citation and quotation), and strategic notions (drafting and revising) that they may not share with their NES teachers and peers.

Teachers must also recognize that working with ESL writers may require more time and effort than working with native English speakers. In my view, these additional requirements need to be met by requiring fewer writing assignments or, preferably, enrolling fewer students in classes. The courses ESL writers take must also be credit bearing and fulfill requirements, like foreign language classes for NES students.

**PROVIDE APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION**

Third, those who deal with ESL writers must provide appropriate instruction, which, in my view, should explicitly recognize students as intelligent human beings and unique individuals with their own views and agendas and their own interesting stories to tell, not as blank slates for teachers to inscribe their opinions on nor as buckets to be filled with their teachers’ worldly wisdom. Furthermore, ESL writers should not be subjected to bait-and-switch scams. If they enroll in courses with titles like Introductory Writing or Freshman Composition, I believe it is certainly reasonable for them to expect and to get courses that focus primarily if not exclusively on writing, as opposed to such interesting and important yet inappropriate topics such as peace education, conflict resolution, environmental concerns, political issues, particular ideologies, literature, critical thinking, cultural studies, or some other cause célèbre du jour, and use writing merely as an add-on or reinforcement activity. I am not suggesting here that teachers conceal their personal interests or political views from their students—this is unrealistic and perhaps impossible; I am suggesting that these interests and views should neither control nor become the curriculum.

But then what are teachers to teach? Some would say that writing courses are merely skill-building courses that have no inherent content, that composition teachers need to bring in content from some other discipline or link their class with a content course to have something to teach. I respectfully disagree. I feel that there is an abundance of information about writing that teachers can and should share with ESL writers. Much can and needs to be said about rhetorical, linguistic, conventional, and strategic issues and about the distinct nature of writing in an L2 and its implications for these issues. (See David, Gordon, & Pollard, 1995, for a similar argument in the context of mainstream writing instruction.)

But then what are students to write about? It seems to me most reasonable and motivating to have students (individually or as a group) choose their own topics, those in which they have a sincere interest and
some intellectual and emotional investment. In my experience, asking ESL writers to write on topics of their own choice often results in texts that are well informed, skillfully crafted, very persuasive, and incredibly moving—I am thinking, in particular, of a piece on the public’s lack of understanding of and often inappropriate response to those afflicted with autism, a paper written by a young Chinese woman majoring in psychology who had helped raise her autistic younger brother. In short, I suggest that students be given control of the why and what of writing and that teachers focus on the how, where, and when, on facilitating rather than controlling student writing. (See Leki, 1991/1992, for a description of an innovative introductory writing curriculum that accommodates such student choice.)

EVALUATE FAIRLY

Fourth, those who deal with ESL writers must evaluate their writing fairly, in both mass and classroom testing contexts. They need to understand that second language acquisition is a slow and gradual process and that expecting ESL students’ writing to be indistinguishable in terms of grammar from that of their NES counterparts is naive and unrealistic. Teachers also need to recognize that ESL writers’ rhetorical differences may be manifestations of their cultural backgrounds and not cognitive or educational deficiencies. (For particularly cogent overviews of contrastive rhetoric research see Connor, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Leki, 1991.) Testers need to provide writing prompts and contexts that do not disadvantage ESL students. (See Kroll & Reid, 1994; Reid & Kroll, 1995, for a lucid and comprehensive discussion of this issue.) Finally, it is important to understand that acceptable performance in one’s classes (including writing classes) means more than the results of any writing test, no matter how well constructed.

In summary, to show ESL writers the respect they are due, to treat them ethically, it is necessary to (a) understand how they are different from their NES counterparts and from each other and to try to accommodate these differences; (b) provide them with instructional options and ESL-friendly teachers, curricula, and materials; (c) offer instructional programs that focus on writing and students’ interests; and (d) judge students’ writing in an informed and equitable manner. To do less is to work against the retention and success of nonnative speakers of English in institutions of higher learning.

REFERENCES


